

Dear Education and Local Government Interim Committee;

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today to address issues pertinent to Montana School Districts. My name is Ron Whitmoyer and I am the superintendent for the East Helena School District. I am in charge of 1150 Kindergarten through 8th graders. With me today is Chris Stout, Superintendent for Seeley Swan Elementary School District's approximately 170 students, and Mike Magone, Superintendent for Lolo School District's approximately 640 students.

We have three main objectives to achieve within our brief time with you today:

- (1) to let you know that Montana's school systems, from AA K-12 Districts to Independent Elementary (K-8) Districts, continue to work together and successfully provide quality education to their students,
- (2) to describe to you some of the key elements of an Independent Elementary District, and
- (3) to answer any questions that you might have regarding Independent Elementary School Districts.

Montana's public school students receive an outstanding and nationally recognized education.

Montana educators and most Montana citizens have a fierce passion for educating their students to the highest level possible. As a result, Montana ranks in the top 10 states nationally on the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) test. This test assesses all 50 states students randomly on a single test that validly compares students' achievement from state to state. And, thanks to parents and the school system, Montana's students have traditionally carried with them a hard work ethic reputation that also helps them compete in the post-school job market. It is your and our desire to continue this reputation as our students increasingly compete at the national and global levels.

What is a Montana Independent Elementary (K-8) School District and how does it play into that objective?

As you probably know, **Independent Elementary Districts' size and function vary every bit as much as the Class AA schools do from the Class C Schools.** In Montana there are currently 134 elementary school districts that serve 16,213 students. K-8 Districts range in enrollment size from approximately 3 students (Sunset?) to approximately 1300 (Hellgate Elementary).

An independent elementary district is a separate unit of LOCAL community control that operates legally apart from a high school district but nevertheless in partnership with high school and other elementary school districts. Like Montana's varied K-12 districts, Montana's K-8 districts continue to evolve to effectively respond to Montana's geographical-educational challenges. They work as partners with their parents and communities, as well as with other school districts, to provide an excellent education to their K-8 students.

One of the biggest advantages that Independent Elementary Districts have when it comes to educating kids is that they can focus more intensely on individual student academic improvement and

success. Though extremely important in providing a rounded education to students, extra-curriculars are rarely at the forefront of K-8 staff, administrative, board, parental and community discussions. The focus tends to be more on what the school is doing to help the child learn. Board meetings and staff meetings usually briefly touch on extra-curriculars, but the main focus is on the instruction and curriculum. Anyone who has worked in both K-12 and K-8 districts knows what a professional and educational “luxury” this is for working toward improving student learning.

Independent Elementary Districts are most “under the microscope” when it comes to assessment and are able to respond accordingly. Students in elementary districts and schools are given annual state assessments in grades 3-8. In high schools, only grade 10 currently takes a state assessment. Additionally the previously mentioned NAEP testing is done on 4th, 8th and 10th graders. As a result, the elementary school systems are very aware of this accountability and transparency and, thanks to their unique K-8 ability to quickly and effectively respond to such academic expectations, have been able to make strategic adjustments to their educational systems in order to further improve instruction, curriculum, and student achievement results.

Independent Elementary Districts are aggressive when it comes to making the most of their resources. You’ll find most Elementary School Districts work in partnership with other Elementary Districts and K-12 Districts in sharing resources/helping each other out. Area curriculum consortiums, special education cooperatives and informal partnership with the high school districts to which they send their students are all regular and active parts of an Independent Elementary District’s operation when it comes to making a smooth transition for their students into future high school grades.

Finally, the Independent Elementary Districts often see outstanding success in building parent and community relationships that foster support for education of students. Like many small K-12 districts located throughout Montana, the Independent K-8’s serve to bond parents and community together to achieve improved successes for the community’s children.

We thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today and look forward to a ongoing collaboration in helping direct education policy for the state. If you have any questions we’d be happy to answer them or offer to research the issue and return that information at a later time.